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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Female/ Masculinities and Male/ Femininities: Complexities of Gender Transgression in Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*

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Abstract:

In current scenario, where people look for an individual identity, social norms of femininity and masculinity, arising from female and male bodies respectively, have created a room for self-expression in both the civic and personal dome. Femininity and masculinity are so well structured in a divergent binary that causes mishmash of male/feminine and female/masculine “atypical” and publically obnoxious while crossing borderlines. Individuals, who don't succeed in executing their gender accurately, have to face strong reactions of hostility, denial and discrimination everywhere, because their odd identity confronts the conventional accustomed type of the link between male/masculine and female/feminine behavior. *Stone Butch Blues*, novel of transgender activist Leslie Feinberg, initiated to bring into notice, the world of gender and sexual borderlands and its populace who “queer” the gendered heterosexual standard and depict not only its formed personality, but also the system's means of penalizing and forcing its subjects into gender and sexual conformity. The novel is a story of Jess Goldberg who leaves home as an adolescent and becomes part of gay subculture and the trials and tribulations she faces growing up in America. This paper explores the capabilities and struggles of the protagonist Jess to accept the complications of being a transgendered one in a domain demanding simple justifications: a he-she emerging whole, withstanding the turmoil. Moreover it will help literature students to cognize many types of lives and various practices of sociality.

Keywords- Femininity; masculinity; racism; transgender; heterosexual; turbulence.

Introduction

Transgender is “*the state of one's gender identity or gender expression not matching one's assigned sex.*” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/transgender>) In USI LGBT Campaign of January, 2012 in USA, the term transgender has been used for people those who were allocated gender, customarily at birth and justified by their organs, but who sense that this gender is an untrue or inadequate depiction of themselves. In addition, gender transgression is a step outside one's own gender binary, which a transgender person takes ahead. A person who classifies as transgender or transsexual generally has a usual feminine structure but feels are like a male and seeks to become a complete male by taking hormones or choosing to take gender reassignment surgeries. These transgender people have an in-house experience of gender identity where they struggle for home inside their own body. They face many different kinds of struggles, including various practices

of discrimination at different levels in the society. Such people are put up with inequity in every field. They are boycotted by societies and segregated from all walks of life. Realizing their pain and anxieties, in *“Transgender Warriors”* Leslie Feinberg expresses her views:

“People who are identified as transgender or transsexual in the society should also be allowed to work together on the basis of human rights as they deserve equality.”(Feinberg: 67)

Feinberg’s pioneering novel *Stone Butch Blues* touches this well-heeled subject of the transgender-rights movements in America, transgender subjectivity and the identity as a he-she in the western society. Feinberg tackles the problems of racism, classism, capitalism and gender transgression that subsist in the contemporary world and tries to bring the connectivity of all these issues into light which gender theoretician Kate Bornstein pronounces as *“groundbreaking”*. (Bornstein: 149) Disclosing her own feelings and experiences in *“Transgender Warriors”*, Feinberg voices for herself:

“I am transgendered. I was born female, but my masculine gender expression is seen as a male...it’s the social contradiction between the two that defines me”. (Feinberg: 101)

Cat Moses expresses views on Feinberg’s novel *Stone Butch Blues*, that’s primed by its author’s respective experience and wide-ranging study, calling it, a depiction of the financial, emotional and physical adversities forced on-*“a group that existed on the marginalized closet economy: the transgendered.”* (Moses: 57)

Complexities and Hardships of Gender Transgression

In *Stone Butch Blues*, Feinberg describes the childhood and early adulthood of its protagonist and narrator, Jess Goldberg, who *“negotiates the boundaries”* of sex, gender and sexuality as feminine or masculine persona creating her own world, very often confronting various violent consequences and yearning *“for an abode both in body and in the commune”*. (Yadav: 53-54) In the poetry book, *Till the End of Her Subsistence*, *“this he-she ambivalence”* and desire for *“gender conformity”* is well expressed with poetic delineation:

“.....she feels exiled

From her own sex to borders

Femininity to Masculinity

None can be a home to her...

...sometimes she questions herself

‘Is she a girl or a boy??’” (Yadav: 53)

Similarly with Jess from her childhood period, as from her memories she recalls; her days were different from normal kids and no one told her what was exactly wrong with her. In school, her classmates used to make fun of her taunting and harassing her by such questions, “*is it animal, mineral or vegetable?*” (Feinberg: 24) Even at home that one word, she was habitual of listening was “*weirdo*” that her father used to say. (Feinberg: 20) She was out casted and she had tried to fix that persistent tagline “*is she a boy or a girl?*” (Feinberg: 13) It was not her wish to “*to be different*” and she admits that she had obeyed all the rules and guidelines and “*tried best to please*”, but she failed to clear the gender standard as a female even in a very young age as a child which again rejects the concept that gender enactment always constructs gender reality. (Feinberg: 13)

Jess has presented herself as transgendered, even though she exerted to act as female/girl and later on as male. But the penalties of all that were not good for her as she was ridiculed everywhere and stripped by gang of disreputable boys in neighborhood. In her teenage, first, while coming from a gay bar she was harassed by cops, later, on another day she was beaten and gang raped by football team members at school. Through this narrative, Feinberg tried her level best to exhibit inner and outer struggles and challenges in squatting and altering her body for happiness and inner satisfaction; Jess was going through. Such queerness of female/masculinity is, not acceptable in the society throws transgender persons to “*face huge discrimination in access to public spaces like restaurants, cinemas, shops, malls etc.*” (<http://www.desikanoon.co.in/2014/04/fundamental-rights-and-transgender.html>)

However, Jess’s problem was not just of performance and others’ approval, as she has learnt well to behave as a man showing off masculinity after transgression from femininity towards masculinity. But if it could not give her the pleasure company that she expected she will extract after such border crossing performance. She felt more deserted and sad as physical alteration couldn’t give her desired satisfaction. Initially she thought and felt happy, as she has expressed through one of her dreams at night where she dreams about having beard on her face and a flat chest that makes her happy with a feeling “*how I was different*”. (Feinberg: 143) When a female tries to turn into male or a male tries to turn into female, about such case, Cat Moses tries to explain, “*anyone whose gender expression falls outside of either ‘F’ or ‘M’*” moves on or steps ahead towards “*the expression of the opposite gender*”. (Moses: 74-75)

Here also, Feinberg has tried to assure through her character’s thoughts where Jess thinks that she might be safe after this alteration. Jess’s lover Theresa who betrays her because of her decision to pass as a male, but she also feels that it is necessary for Jess to take hormones for change otherwise she might be killed on she will kill herself “*out of madness*”. (Feinberg: 153) Deeply painful and full of struggles, the life of a transgender who fails to live as a female, fails to clear as a male without physical alteration, fails to survive in that altered body. Gender transgression period or crossing the borderlines is not fully accomplished by Jess. Although she decided to transform her physically, that self-enacted transformation led her to further different kind of problems where she lost her control on those complications.

Gender transgression didn't embolden her, leaving no other choice. Moreover, it secluded her from that society she passionately wished to be a part of. Her own friend Theresa also broke up with her leaving her alone and depressed. While an argument with Theresa, Theresa tries to tell her that she is a woman. Jess replies, 'No, I'm not....I'm a he-she. That's different.' (Feinberg: 147) When Jess had started taking hormones, slowly her home emerged physically being a reality as "beard stubble" roughened her cheeks and her face became "slimmer and more angular".(Feinberg: 171) She felt like that she had found a home in the body what she was missing from a long time.

Even though, after physical alteration, she feels less scared and safer in terms of physical safety, but gradually she realizes that clearance as a male is not the solution of all her problems. She entered into many relationships as a man but she still was feeling lonely. Edna with whom she had a short relationship, she expresses her loneliness to her that she felt like "a ghost" and feels like she had been "buried alive". (Feinberg: 213) She feared as if she was disappearing and no one would see her or speak to her or touch her. She felt that her whole life she kept on passing and now she doesn't have concrete memories or past as one specific identity. While passing as a male she realized her disappearing identity as a threat. She struggled to create a self-being lonely in the social world where one wanted to give a hand to her being part of resisting society. Cat Moses expresses opinions on the struggles of Jess being alone while creating a self between such a social surrounding where she was alienated, fragmented and left secluded. Moses finds that Jess's confrontation to suppression and "*the refashioning of resisting self*" turned into losing fights and loneliness, as society would never approve that. (Moses: 78)

For her, physically continuing, as a female was very difficult and same condition was with existing as a male. So finally she opted third space in between these two spaces, combining them in her body, crossing the borderline of femininity, and not fully reaching to masculinity. She found it creative and comfy. Neither she wants to return to her original feminine state nor she wanted to stay in home with masculinity.

Ultimately as a result, she stopped taking hormonal treatment for clearance as a male. Now her identity remains in a complex state somewhere between female/masculinity and male/femininity where she had altered herself physically as a male not fully but partially stopping that transformation in the mid. However she was craving for a home and here she found it in between these two constructed genders. Her complex self now remains between male and female creating a new third gender space where as a transgender, she feels more comfortable and relieved. Kozee, Tylka, & Bauerband have confirmed this state in their article:

"Many transgender people experience a period of identity development that includes better understanding one's self-image, self-reflection, and self-expression. More specifically, the degree to which individuals feel genuine, authentic, and comfortable within their external appearance and accept their genuine identity is referred to as transgender congruence" (Kozee: 179-196)

Jess also found this third gender space and transgression state more exciting and of contentment and concluded by saying that question of her identity can not answered if there are only two gender choices as she belongs to neither of them. Her body declined “*categorization*” as either “*a woman or a transsexual*” and created a distracting third gender position dealing with harassment and nuisance “*physically and psychologically.*” (Yadav: 53)

Possibilities for Recognition after Gender Transgression

Everywhere in the world, ubiquitously, people are going through such harassment, even in India, Indian Supreme Court has recognized transgender as third gender admitting that how a transgender has to suffer extreme discrimination because of the non-recognition of identity:

“Non-recognition of the identity of transgender persons denies them equal protection of law, thereby leaving them extremely vulnerable to harassment, violence and sexual assault in public spaces, at home and in jail, also by the police. Sexual assault, including gang rape and stripping is being committed with impurity and.....further, non-recognition of identity of transgender persons results in them facing extreme discrimination in all sphere of society, especially in the field of employment, education, healthcare etc.”(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/transgender>)

The personality of Jess is being shaped by such brutal experiences; she faced in her life everywhere as she was raped in teenage, crushed and beaten up by cops, injured physically and psychologically. Being a deserted and outcast Jess exerted a lot to find home by different means wherever she goes such as through experiences of surgical alterations or through hormonal treatment or staying behind bars or going for labor movement as she feels the world unreceptive for her. She crosses the gender border of woman to be a man; thinking that this transformation will open new options for her and will make people accept her socially, but later on, she goes back to her in-between state and reluctantly refuses to accept transsexual identity for her. In this coming home narrative, Prosser notices that Jess “*chooses, instead, an incoherently sexed body, ending up in an uneasy borderland between man and woman*”, and gets failure in clearance of either. (Prosser: 488)

Feinberg has tried to give the story an optimistic edge at the end as Jess could be able to define herself as he-she with a third gender identity which rejects borders of both socially acceptable gender spaces. As transgender with he-she identity, she moves back to New York for building a home for her where she makes friends with neighbor, finds a new job, tries to be friends with her old mates. She started working for transgendered people collecting the history of movements related to liberation and equality with a hope for transgender people’s better future.

Awareness against Accumulated Discrimination

Education, being a fundamental right of every human, helps in expanding one’s horizons building foundational skills for earning one’s livelihood. Individuals, having higher education,

are more likely to be independent on public platform, less likely to be punished or jailed or suffered from poverty or financial crisis, mental or psychological depressions. There would be fewer chances of health issues and social crimes with more possibilities of active participation in civic activities for betterment of humanity. But such opportunities of getting education equally in a peaceful favorable environment are not provided to all human beings equally whole over the world such as transgender people. Even if such people try to avail equal educational opportunities they have to face discrimination, torture and violence that later affect their whole life.

In a report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey, “*Injustice at Every Turn*”, M. Grant, Jack Harrison, Jody L. Herman, Justin Tanis and Mara Keisling have given the data related to discrimination done accumulatively. According to the report, sixty three percent (63%) of transgender participants had experienced a serious act of discrimination-events that would have a major impact on a person’s quality of life and ability to sustain them financially or emotionally. (Grant & Harrison: 8) These events happened in their lives included the following due to bias treatment:

- Physical Assault & Harassment
- School Harassment
- Teacher/ classmates bullying
- Loss of Job and Struggle at Professional front
- Denial of Medical Services
- Homelessness
- Loss of Relationship or Break Up with Partner
- Imprisonment

As the consequences of these widespread injustices with denial of human dignity are inhuman and brutal, ranging from joblessness and homelessness to illness and death, therefore this paper is a call to action for all of us, furthermore, to support the struggle for complete equality with broader social justice, respecting the diversity of human expression and identity creating opportunity for all. Like the report “*Injustice at Every Turn*”, this paper also brings to light the struggle of transgender people through the portrayal of the protagonist Jess and other characters who face “injustice at every turn”: in childhood homes, in school systems that promise to shelter and educate, in harsh and exclusionary workplaces, at the grocery store, the hotel front desk, in doctor’s offices and emergency rooms, before judges and at the hands of landlords, police officers, health care workers and other service providers. It exercises to spread awareness to treat all human beings equally giving them their own space.

Conclusion

Jess Goldberg’s journey of life and other main characters’ struggles in Feinberg’s novel *Stone Butch Blues* reveal various practices of sociality. It resonates the issues of queer personality,

realizing her identity and finding her home through the process of transgression or transgressed norms of gender and sexuality, negotiating gender borders to have one suitable for her or create a third one. During that struggle for home in the society, Feinberg has proficiently irradiated shimmers of contentment which one's gets after lots of sufferings and tortures with an assurance of better life after post-revolution and transgression. The novel rightly explores the themes of gender transgression and liberation from physical and psychological struggle while opting out a third identity.

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